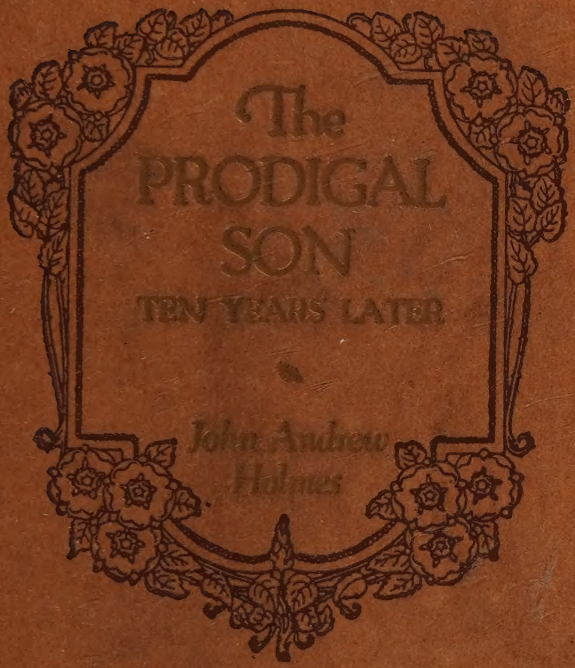

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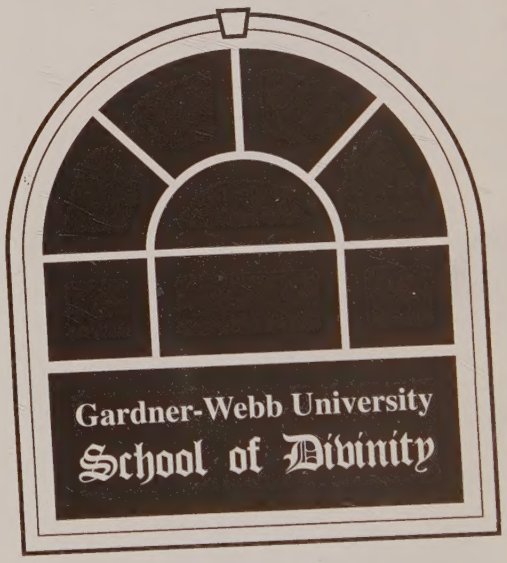
"I FEEL SURE THAT SUCH ADDITIONAL REPORT OF HIM AS I CAN FURNISH FROM THESE VISITS WILL PROVE OF INTEREST TO HIS MANY FRIENDS, AND THAT IT WILL BE ACCEPTED AS SANCTIONED IN A SENSE BY THE AUTHOR OF THE PARABLE."

Betty L. Maynard

"'YOU SAW THE RETURNED PRODIGAL,' SAID THE SERVANT, 'ON HIS HIGH DAY. BUT EVERY DAY IS A HIGH DAY FOR HIS BROTHER.'"

School of Divinity



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THE PRODIGAL SON TEN YEARS LATER

THE PRODIGAL SON TEN YEARS LATER

BY

JOHN ANDREW HOLMES, D. D.

THE PILGRIM PRESS

BOSTON CHICAGO

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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO ALL YOUTHS AND MAIDENS WHO ARE STILL ABIDING IN THEIR FATHER'S HOUSE, IN THE HOPE THAT IT MAY HELP THEM TO REMAIN WHERE THEY ARE HAPPIER THAN THE MOST FORTUNATE PRODIGAL WHO HAS EVER RETURNED FROM THE FAR COUNTRY : : : : : : :

Luke 15 : 11-14, 25, 31

FOREWORD

Shortly before the time of Christ, there actually lived a certain prodigal son. Of this we have documentary proof. Only recently there has been unearthed a letter written by him to his mother. In this letter he states that he has heard from his friend Postumus that his mother had gone to the metropolis to look for him. If he had only known, he would have met her there, but he had not the courage to go back to his own village. "I go about in rags," he says, "I write to you that I am naked. I beseech you, Mother, be reconciled to me. I know what I have brought upon myself. I have been chastened every day. I know that I have sinned. I beseech

you . . ." The rest is too worn and torn to read.

It may be that this boy was the prodigal in real life from whom the Author of a famous parable sketched the character of the Prodigal Son. But if so, he has ceased to live in any one age, and dwells now in all time. And this is not only because he appears in a literary production that is immortal, but because as a matter of fact he is a character of all ages. Like the Wandering Jew, every century has seen him.

It is due to this timelessness of the Prodigal that I have been able to pay him two visits. The first time I stopped at his father's farm was some ten years before his departure for the Far Country. Ten years after he had returned I called on the young man again. I feel sure that such additional re-

port of him as I can furnish from these visits will prove of interest to his many friends, and that it will be accepted as sanctioned in a sense by the Author of the parable, for he it is who has laid down the principles from which one may assure oneself of the truth of this account.

THE PRODIGAL SON TEN YEARS LATER

A certain man had two sons . . . And he divided unto them his living. And . . . the younger son gathered all together and took his journey into a far country; and there he wasted his substance with riotous living. And . . . he . . . spent all . . . —*Luke 15: 11-14.*

Now his elder son was in the field . . . And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that is mine is thine.—*Luke 15: 25, 31.*

THE PRODIGAL SON TEN YEARS LATER

On my first visit to the home of him who has since been known widely as the Prodigal Son, I remained a number of days. I enjoyed abundant opportunity on that occasion for both talking with him and observing him. He was an engaging little fellow, interested in every adventurous sport, and we rapidly became warm friends. Yet even then I perceived that not all was well with him.

The fact is that the lad was already preparing rapidly for his notorious trip. He had begun to choose pleasures that he knew were weakening and wrong, whereas his brother showed a disposition to

stand out against them. I found him attending school only when there was no stronger attraction elsewhere. He had failed to get his way in his class on the Sabbath, and had dropped out. Nor was he attending the service of worship. It was evident that he regarded the hard things of life as electives, and that he was growing up undisciplined.

Now I was not unaware whither such a course leads. I felt confident even then that it was only a matter of time until my little friend would be eating with the pigs in the far-away land.

I felt the surer of this because of a certain belief that I found in his country. Many said that it was not a bad thing for boys to go away for a season, and, as they put it, "see life." It is scarce too much to say that they were ex-

pected to go. Indeed, there were not lacking authorities to insist that boys like this one could not avoid going. "To predict what his life must be," they told me, "you would need only to have known his grandfather. For the old man was an emigrant himself, and the lad was born with emigrant blood in him. He is, therefore, bound to emigrate."

I am sure, however, that this was an exaggeration. I am not unaware that there are children who come into the world so crippled and blind and degenerate that they seem marked for the Far Country. Indeed, there are those who seem to have been born there. But these are exceptions. It had not been so with the Prodigal. It is true that he had not inherited quite the same tendencies as his brother, nor shown precisely the

same degree of natural vigor. He was a bit short in power of resistance, and prolonged effort seemed constitutionally harder for him. But this was all. There seemed to me no reason why he ever need leave his father, and if the community, instead of arguing so earnestly that the lad was destined to go away, had interested itself in preventing such journeys, it seems plain to me that his story would have been different.

Yet, strange to say, the neighbors frequently subscribed with real cheerfulness vast sums to bring wanderers back. Everybody wanted them to return, and from time to time there would recur periods of much emotion over the effort to recover them. I remember, particularly, that I heard loud praise of a certain route by which a great many would occa-

sionally come home together. It was called the Sawdust Trail, and great was the joy associated with a return over it. During that visit I talked about this Trail with a neighbor of the boy's family. "I knew a man," said he, "who went to the Far Country, and became so vicious that the pigs were too proud to eat husks with him. But he finally hit the Sawdust Trail, and the experience was so glorious that he seemed almost glad that he had gone wrong. Now," continued this neighbor, "the elder brother in the household you are visiting, who is so sober and industrious, will never be able to rise in a meeting and tell of the joyous return that this man could boast; but this younger boy, who is already packing for the trip, will be in position to get just such an experience."

I knew, however, that I had seen many young men going to that far-off land for every one I had seen returning. And I recalled also that men whose duty was to bring young people back agreed with those who made it their business to restrain them from going that unless first there had been a good deal of attention paid to teaching a boy the beauties of the home land, the chance of his return from such a journey was almost negligible.

It was with sadness, therefore, that I took my leave of my young friend. I knew which way he was headed, and I was gravely doubtful of his return. However, all my doubts upon the latter point had been removed long before my second visit, twenty years later. Whatever may have happened to

his companions, at least this boy came back.

I heard a great deal about his father's forgiveness of him, and had my share in the rejoicing over it. In spirit, I witnessed the dancing, enjoyed the music, and ate my share of the fatted calf. The more I listened to the wonderful story of my friend's happy return, the more anxious I grew to set my eyes upon him again, and rejoice with him in his own home, until one day I found myself once more on the way to his father's farm.

Upon drawing near the house I was not surprised to hear an orchestra playing. Through the window I descried a man dining with friends. I asked a servant to say to this man that an old friend of his, who had rejoiced in his return, had come to visit him. I was informed, to my surprise,

that this was not the younger son, as I had assumed, but his elder brother, who had made so sorry an appearance in the parable. I could hardly believe it, and when I was told that the younger brother was in the field, where I might find him, I remonstrated, saying that I had always associated the hard work of the farm with the man who was now so comfortable in the house, and that I had never imagined him who was in the field, except as eating delicious veal to the sound of the violin.

I was told politely that this was an error into which all visitors had apparently fallen, and an illustration of how common it was to read into the works of the Author of the story of the younger brother much not contained therein. I was informed that this Author usually had one lesson he desired

to teach, and but one, in any given story, and that he selected only such facts out of the lives of his characters as he needed for that purpose. It was true, I was told, that a special dinner had been prepared in honor of the return of this lost boy, and for one day he had been the cynosure of all eyes, while the father in his great joy could think of nothing else than that one whom he had counted dead was returned to life. But there had been only the one day of the wanderer's return; and the next day, and all days since, had been different; and while the way of the repentant transgressor had not been so hard as it had been in the Far Country, still it had by no means become soft. "You will remember," said my informant, "when you pause to think, that even on the day of the feast over the Prodigal's re-

turn, when the elder brother had protested against such a demonstration, the father distinctly stated that that was a unique occasion, because of a special event, while every day was a day of gladness because of his elder son, who was always with him, and entitled to everything he had at all times. So indeed has it been," concluded the servant. "You saw the returned Prodigal, through the parable, on his high day. But every day is a high day for his brother."

Then there came to me the words of an old book. I had committed them to memory years before, and believed them in a vague sort of way, yet strangely enough, I had never thought of them when I read this parable.

"Let not thine heart envy sinners;
But be thou in the fear of the Lord all the day long:
For surely there is a sequel . . . "

How those words fitted the thoughts I had indulged concerning these brothers and their parable! My heart had envied this young sinner, and the man who had been in the fear of the Lord all the day long I had despised, all because of what had happened on one particular occasion. That there would be a sequel, I had never considered, but now that my eyes were open, I wished to know what it might be; so I hastened to the field.

When I was yet a long way off, I saw the bent form of a ploughman. As I drew near, I noted a lack of firmness in his tread. His hair was gray, his eyes downcast, his face so wrinkled and scarred that it seemed branded by the hot iron of the cruel king of the Far Country. I was about to inquire where I might find him whom I

sought, when suddenly something in the way the man looked up at me seemed strangely familiar. Impossible as it seemed, this was the same person I had known twenty years earlier. His smile was still winsome, and my heart went out to him again, but my cheery greeting died upon my lips, as a great wave of pity swept over my soul. The abundant vitality that had once been his was gone. While he had lived fewer years than his brother, it was obvious that he was also nearer the end of his days.

He talked with me frankly, as he had done in his boyhood. "The whole world," he said, "knows the substance of my story. I had my fling, and I have not quite recovered my equilibrium. I was a drinking man when I was out there in that mining camp—there were

months at a time when I was sober scarce a day altogether—and the Author was right in saying that in such riotous living I wasted my substance. It was not alone that I spent all my fortune, but the physicians tell me that at the same time I burned out the best elements of my blood, and lost the steadiness from my nerves.

"After one of my drunken orgies," he continued, "I lay out in the cold half the night, and from that night's exposure I shall never recover. When I was out of money, and out of health, I was for a while in actual want. Those were the days when even husks looked good to me, and my strength was further depleted by hunger. Nor is this all. There are things I did when under the power of liquor that I could not bring myself to tell a living soul.

And from those shameless acts, in which I prostituted the most sacred powers I possess, my body is weak and impure. While I have returned from the Far Country, and rejoice in all it means to me to be back, still its effects upon my health and strength remain, and when the minister shall say that I have been taken out of this world in the providence of God, he will not be telling the whole story, in which my own improvidence plays a somber part."

I have put the substance of his conversation on this point into my own language, but as I heard him talk I perceived that it was not alone his body that had suffered. For he was illiterate, and the pleasures of long evenings around the reading table were denied him. Nor were the joys of cultivated society his. I gathered from what

he told me that when his brother entertained the great and wise, he himself felt so out of place, that he preferred to remain in the stable in the company of the horses.

He admitted also that he was not a good farmer. "I don't understand the soil," said he, "as my brother does; I know nothing of judging grain or stock; and machinery is a mystery to me. While my brother was learning all that my father knew of agriculture, and adding new knowledge from the experiment stations, I was sowing wild oats, and learning nothing. So while I am not treated as a hired servant, still I feel like one. I am only a manual laborer on this farm, doing the coarse work, while hired servants perform skilled labor, and earn more than I do."

By this time, I scarce needed to

ask if he was poor, for how could he be otherwise? He had had his half of the property, and it was gone. As the father had said on the day of his return, all that remained of the estate was the elder brother's. During the decade since, the wealthier one, through the natural growth of his inheritance, hastened by his own skilled management, had grown still more wealthy; but the poorer one had made little headway. With no property to produce an income, with no power of educated intellect, with no acquired skill in farming, with an impaired body and shrunken courage, he was able to purchase food and medicine, and little more. While the fatted calf had been his, yet all the cattle on all the hills of the ancestral estate belonged to his brother. And upon the returned Prodigal was

now being enforced the law of the sweaty brow, which the elder son had already fulfilled.

To be sure, the more fortunate one was charitable enough toward him. Yet you would easily gather from the parable itself, what observers in all centuries have also attested, that the elder brother was possessed of a keen sense of justice, which kept his sense of kindness well in check. He felt that his brother had already had his share, and that he himself was entitled to the wealth he had honestly inherited, as well as to what he had laboriously earned.

Nor have I told you yet all that I learned to my sorrow and surprise that day. The man in the field showed in his whole bearing that a realization of the losses he had occasioned others during his lapse from decency was now bur-

dening his spirit. He had led another youth into the Far Country, for men seldom go there alone. In a drunken riot, he had injured a man. He had not only devoured his living with harlots, but he had done his share to add to their wretched number, having caused the ruin of a trusting girl. In those days, the better man in him had lain unconscious; but now he had come to himself, and the knowledge of the wrongs he had done burned within him like the fires of Gehenna. The sufferings he had inflicted upon others were beyond repair, and no forgiveness from his father could ever remove the cankering knowledge that he had committed them, and that somewhere there was a man who was a criminal and a woman who was hopeless, because of what he had done.

Nor had the neighbors forgotten. They loved to call him "the jailbird," and when they were angry they always twitted him of his past, and spoke with derision of his "trip abroad," and of how much it had cost him. While he was more fortunate than most men who have served their terms in prison, because he had work and a living and a home that could not be taken from him, still he suffered much of the anguish of spirit that all ex-convicts know. The hard-heartedness, disdain and prudent cautiousness of men whose records were free of outward flaw bore heavily upon his spirit.

This poor man told me also that he envied the happy home life of his brother, who was blessed in the pure love of wife and children. He himself had loved a good woman. But her father would

never have consented to their marriage. And his own conscience had been so quickened since his return that he could not ask a decent woman to become unequally yoked together with one who by the life of a debauchee had forfeited all right to a happy home life. All this the man told me, in great heaviness of soul.

These revelations came to me as a shock. I had thought only of his forgiveness by a loving father, and the gratifying fact that he was always ready to meet his children more than half way with his pardon, but I had not considered that forgiveness does not necessarily include wealth, nor health, nor education, nor a happy memory of a well-spent past, nor the respect of one's neighbors, nor the enjoyments of society. But now I beheld with my own eyes, and I saw

that even forgiveness has its limitations.

I learned further that in a multitude of similar cases the condition of returned prodigals was worse, for the majority had been enticed or driven again to the Far Country, and had perished there. He himself had very nearly gone back. The inhospitable temper of his brother had been almost more than the returned wanderer could bear. And on the Sabbath many of the elder brothers in the congregation looked suspiciously at him, saying that he looked rather disreputable to be seen in a pew. What with his lack of settled habits, and what with the power his appetites and passions and indolence had acquired, it had been only by the narrowest margin that he had not drifted back to the Far Country. "Indeed," said one man,

"he is the only prodigal who has ever come back to this community who stuck, and some of us don't believe it pays to have such trash return at all."

Do you wonder, then, that I said as I communed with myself, on my way home from the field where I had met the Prodigal at his plough, that I would never cease to warn young men and women against the beguilement of the Far Country? "I will tell them," I said, "that no forgiveness, however freely granted, can take the place of innocence. I will tell them that the father cannot give them back all they have lost. I will say to them that those who return are few at the best, and that even of those the majority yield again to the deadly lure of that region. I will warn them not to set their hearts on the hope that they may come at

length, ragged and hungry, staggering home, with black and bitter memories and darkened hopes, along the Sawdust Trail. I will bend my strongest energies to guarding the frontier of the father's land, and no youth or maiden, if I can help it, shall ever receive a passport into the Far Country." And I meditated again on the words I have quoted from that old book:

"Let not thine heart envy sinners;
But be thou in the fear of the Lord all the day long:
For surely there is a sequel . . . "

Yet I would not close the story without saying that this man seemed happy. There was a real joy in his countenance, and even as I walked away, pitying him, I heard him singing at his humble plough, "O happy day that fixed my choice!" He knew that he had

been reinstated. He had come back to his father, and he had the consciousness of being his son.

It was true that his mother had died of a broken heart, and he could neither forget that he was the cause, nor bring her back. Yet surely even she was happy in heaven over his return. There was great rejoicing there, he had been told, over every sinner that repented. And how happy he was in the favor of his father! While the old man leaned for counsel and for execution upon the elder son, yet his affection was no less for the younger.

The fellowship of the father and his returned boy was a delight to witness. Sometimes one fancied indeed that there was a certain added intensity to it because of the temporary estrangement, and once I heard the old man echoing,

when he thought no one was listening, those words twice repeated on the great day of the return: "This my son was dead, and is alive again."

To be sure, this could not restore the wealth, the health, the education, the skill, the reputation, the happiness, nor even quite the security, that his outlaw life had taken away; yet he was forgiven, and all the old estrangement was gone forever.

He could not hope to be quite what he might have been. Some of the evil he had done would be upon him until death. Yet he would no longer be lost. Whereas he had been dead, he was alive again. Moreover, the future would work for him; and who can say what eternity, in the hands of the Infinite, may not accomplish?

There was one very peculiar

joy, it should be added, that this man possessed. Out of his experience with sin and its sorrow, it was given him to paint the horror of it all as the minister down at the church could not. And when all ordinary means of rescuing men from a wandering life had been tried, it became quite the custom to call him in. Whole communities would do this, and ask him out of his experience with the accursed thing to plead with others who were what he had been. This man spoke out of a wretched experience of evil and a deep sense of the blessedness of his new life, that made their appeal to thousands who seemed beyond the reach of wise and saintly pastors.

I communed with myself of these things also as I came home from that famous farm. And I said: "The fatted calf, and the

dancing, and the music, and the outstretched arms of the father, and the ring and the robe, were not too much to express the joy we all should feel when a prodigal returns. It is immeasurably better to come back from the Far Country than to remain there. Never will I fail to urge a prodigal to return."

Yet I did not waver from my principal determination that at all hazards I would prevent young people from squandering their inheritance. For it was too obvious how much the forgiven son still lacked of being what he might have been. While on the high day of his return there was great rejoicing, yet far more blessed is the son who has remained ever at home. All that the father has belongs always to him.

Let not thine heart envy sinners;
But be thou in the fear of the Lord
all the day long:
For surely there is a sequel . . .

—*Proverbs 23 : 17, 18.*

Holmes, John Andrew.
The prodigal son ten years
later

"'YOU SAW THE RETURNED PRODIGAL,' SAID THE SERVANT, 'ON HIS HIGH DAY. BUT EVERY DAY IS A HIGH DAY FOR HIS BROTHER.'"

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